

VZCZCXRO2815
PP RUEHROV
DE RUEHMO #3323/01 3221339
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 171339Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0741
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 003323

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/17/2018
TAGS: [PROV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [MARR](#) [RS](#) [XF](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S CONCEPT OF THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST,
TINGED BY RACISM

REF: A. MOSCOW 751
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 346
[1](#)C. MOSCOW 1478

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With the prospect of a major Middle East conference being convened in Moscow in early 2009, analysts explained to us how Russia views the Middle East and how they believe the region, in turn, views Russia. For Russians, the "Middle East" is a concept more than a region, which includes Russia's Muslim population, Central Asia, and the broader Middle East. The primary importance of the Middle East lies in its ability to create instability within the Muslim world, which could threaten Russian interests. Analysts believe that Russian influence in the region is severely limited, and the GOR has little chance of making an impact on the Middle East peace process. They doubt the real extent of Russia's supposed increase in economic activity in the region, which, apart from certain energy deals, is based upon Middle Eastern governments using Russia to appear to balance their relationship with the U.S. Russia's real influence is with the "Arab street" that again looks to Moscow to counter Washington, as it did during the Soviet era. Ironically, the analysts believe that Russians harbor racist attitudes toward Arabs and Moscow cares little for their well-being. End summary.

Russia's Expansive Idea of the "Middle East"

[1](#)2. (C) The Moscow Carnegie Center's Dmitri Trenin explained that Russians have an expansive concept of the "Middle East" that consists of three parts: Russia's Muslim population, Central Asia, and the broader Middle East that includes "everything West of India." Russia's Muslims are the most important aspect of the "Middle East," as they have the greatest political and security implications. While there is no Russian version of an American-style ethnic lobby, the views of Russian Muslims are taken seriously by the political leadership and relations with the larger Muslim world are considered a factor in maintaining "domestic tranquillity" (ref A). The potential for trouble with "restive" Muslims in the Caucasus still exists, although Moscow is ready to co-opt them the way it did in Chechnya through Kadyrov. Central Asia is viewed as part of Russia's sphere of influence and has to be protected from outside influences, including Iran and Muslim extremists.

[1](#)3. (C) Trenin said that although Russians saw developments in the West and East Asia as most crucial to their interests, they did consider the "southern flank" because events in the Middle East could adversely impact the Muslim populations in Russia and Central Asia. This view was seconded by Tzvey Mirkin, an Israeli Emboff and former chief Russia analyst for the Israeli MFA, who thought that Russian interest in the Middle East was based upon the belief that the region was the primary source of global instability and threatened Central Asia, the Caucasus, and other predominantly Muslim parts of

Russia.

Russian Influence and Opportunities Limited

¶4. (C) Analysts were nearly unanimous in telling us that Russian influence in the Middle East was limited. Trenin said that Russia was no longer a "stakeholder" in any one Middle Eastern country, perhaps with the exception of Syria as a result of arms sales. Even there, however, Moscow's ability to influence Damascus' actions was limited. Both Trenin and Marianna Belenkaya, a commentator at RIA Novosti and Russia Today's Arabic service, said that Russia was not willing to spend its capital, either political or monetary, in the manner of the U.S. and Europe. Until Russia is willing to provide real aid to the region, the way the U.S. does with Israel, Egypt and Jordan, it will never have anywhere near the level of influence.

¶5. (C) Analysts thought that Russia had proven it had little ability to bring positives to international dialogue in the Middle East, and that Moscow's real influence amounted to its "obstacle-making ability." They reiterated that the prospects for the GOR's plans for a Moscow Middle East conference, now slated for the spring of 2009, were dim. Both Georgi Mirksy, a longtime Arabist currently with the Institute of Higher Economics, and Middle East Studies Institute Director Yevgeniy Satanovskiy, stressed that if Washington could not bring the Israelis and Palestinians to an agreement despite years of trying, there was little Moscow could accomplish.

MOSCOW 00003323 002 OF 002

Business Contracts Tied to ME Politics

¶6. (C) Belenkaya argued that Russian prospects in the Middle East were so meager that many contracts were given to Russian companies by Middle Eastern governments for political purposes, and could be withdrawn for the same reasons. She pointed to Saudi Arabia, where Russian Railways appeared to win, then lose, a major contract; Libya, where Russian oil and gas companies have encountered difficulties and Moscow had yet to land an arms deal; and Algeria, which returned MIGs to Russia complaining of their quality. These countries went to Russia in order to appear to balance their relationship with the U.S., but would go back to the U.S. if it suited their interests. Mirsky agreed that Middle Eastern countries used Russia to appear to balance their relationship with the U.S., much as Russia used them to appear a diplomatic player. He dismissed Putin's touted 2007 trip to the region as being more about wanting to seem active than accomplishing real political objectives.

¶7. (C) Ruslan Pukhov, Editor of the Moscow Defense Brief, dismissed the prospect of Russian military sales to the Middle East increasing dramatically. He classified Russia's primary arms customers as "marginally blockaded markets" Syria, Iran and Venezuela, plus countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia that wish to avoid the political strings that come with buying from the U.S. Pukhov thought little of reports of a potential Saudi arms purchase, saying that Riyadh was simply "throwing Russia a bone." Mirkin thought, however, that the Russian establishment took potential arms sales and other contracts in the region seriously since they stood to benefit personally.

Russia's Influence is With the Arab Street

¶8. (C) If Russia has influence in the Middle East, it is with the Arab street that now looks to Russia the way it did the Soviet Union to stand up to the U.S., argued Belenkaya. During the Georgia crisis, Russia Today's Arabic service was deluged with emails from people in the Middle East who were

glad that "Russia was back." The prevalence of such sentiments meant that regional leaders talk-up their relations with Russia in order to strike a pose for public consumption. The odd arms sale or business contract with Russian companies accomplished this as well. Ironically, both Belenkaya and Mirsky argued, the Russian leadership did not really care about Arabs, their views of which were tinged by racism. They only felt warmly toward Israelis, with whom Russia had strong cultural ties.

Comment

19. (C) Analysts have typically viewed Russian motives in the Middle East with skepticism, and recognized the limits of GOR influence in the region (ref B). They appear to have taken the last year, which began with hope that Russia could use its relationships with Syria, Lebanon, Hamas, and even Iran, to help move the various tracks of the peace process forward, as a sign that Russian options are even more circumspect than once believed. When it came time for Moscow to use its vaunted ties with Damascus and Tehran to help settle the stalemate over selection of a new Lebanese President, even the GOR admitted that it had little real ability to do so (ref C). For Russia, the Middle East remains a concern primarily because Moscow believes that the region can cause it trouble. The Middle East also offers Russia the opportunity to appear a vigorous diplomatic player. The upcoming Moscow conference holds out the prospect of maintaining this appearance, if little else.

BEYRLE